

Monday, March 22, 2010

## **Majority of council supports Costco plan**

### **Some neighbors say they support warehouse club but not gas station**

by Amber Parcher | Staff Writer

A majority of Montgomery County Council members support spending \$4 million to subsidize the opening of a Costco in the Westfield Wheaton Shopping Center, according to a memo that Council President Nancy Floreen (D-At Large) of Garrett Park sent to County Executive Isiah Leggett.

The proposal for the subsidy is set to go before the Planning, Housing, and Economic Development committee in April or May and will likely go to the full council by Memorial Day, according to Steve Silverman, the director of the Department of Economic Development, who spoke on behalf of Leggett on Monday.

Floreen sent the memo to Leggett last week, stating that five of the nine county council members approve of the subsidy, which would be paid directly to Costco to help build the \$60-million, 232,000-square-foot store. Knowing the council supports the subsidy, Leggett has already forged ahead with the Costco plan by proposing a zoning-text amendment March 16 that would allow gas stations in regional shopping centers, a key component of Costco's proposed development in Wheaton.

Costco, a warehouse club that is based in Washington state, has expressed interest in building at the long-vacant former Hecht's store location at Westfield Wheaton Shopping Center in downtown Wheaton, according to county officials. The plans call for opening a gas station on mall property, in the parking lot next to the store.

Current zoning requires gas stations to go through a rigorous special-exception process before being allowed in commercial zones. This process analyzes the proposed station's economic and environmental impact on surrounding neighborhoods.

But Leggett's proposal would eliminate the need for the special-exception process, which residents say will remove an important safeguard that would ensure that the gas station doesn't harm nearby neighborhoods.

"The gas station would simply be built, and no one from the zoning board would determine if it makes sense," said John Seabreeze, speaking as president of the board of directors of the Kenmont Swim & Tennis Club, which sits directly behind Westfield Wheaton.

The zoning amendment would also set a dangerous precedent for shopping malls in the county, said Donna R. Savage, the interim president of the Kensington Heights Civic Association.

"It says nothing about how many gas stations could be there," she said. "Westfield could raze all their buildings and build a gas station heaven."

But special exceptions are lengthy, volatile processes that can take years, Silverman said. If the county were to go that route, there's a high chance Costco would back out of the deal, he said.

"This will help it not get hung up potentially for years," he said.

Silverman also said he doesn't believe Leggett's proposal throws out necessary safeguards.

Westfield Wheaton would likely spend \$100,000 in landscaping to buffer the adjacent neighborhoods from the gas station, Silverman said. In addition, the county's Department of Permitting Services will review the zoning-text amendment carefully, he said.

A public meeting on the text amendment is set for 7:30 p.m. April 20.

The subsidy itself is controversial among stakeholders in downtown Wheaton who argue the money could be better spent on supporting local businesses that are struggling.

But Savage said her citizens association does support subsidizing the store without the gas station. She said her community can deal with the traffic the store generates but not fumes the gas station would create.

"We'd be happy with Costco. The community wants the store; we just don't want the gas station," she said.

Staff writer Erin Cunningham contributed to this report.